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A DEFENSE OF NATURALISM.

ROGER SHERMAN LOOMIS.

NATURALISM is a word with as many phases of meaning as pacifism or patriotism, and about it rages nearly as fierce a conflict. When Zola issued his well-known pronunciamento that Naturalistic art was Nature seen through a temperament, he stressed the word "Nature." Nature and Nature only must be the subject of art: to face Nature frankly and openly, to present her dulnesses and stupidities and shames with scrupulous impartiality must be the aim of the artist. Now modern English criticism has preferred to call such full-length and unflattering portraiture of Dame Nature, even the emphasis upon her wry neck, bow legs, and squint eyes, by the name of Realism. Accordingly, when the critic nowadays quotes Zola's definition of Naturalism, he stresses the word "temperament." Naturalistic art is Nature seen through a certain temperament, or through a certain formula created by that temperament. Naturalism, we are told, is not simply a reproduction of the homely and repulsive side of Nature's physiognomy, but an attempt to read in it a certain character.

With Zola's profession faithfully to portray Nature the critics have now no quarrel, but with his practice of giving a certain interpretation of her character they and a great body of readers beg leave, more or less politely, to differ. Realism, though not admitted to so high a seat as idealizing poetry and romance, has been received into the company of the immortals, and Howells and Bennett are permitted to sit down to dinner with self-respecting critics. But Naturalism, Zola's interpretation of Nature, the high priests of criticism hold up to mocking and execration. Flaubert, Ibsen, Hardy, Moore, Brieux, and Masters were all at first denounced in the reputable journals as devils from the pit: and they are still ostracized by good society as if a sulphurous vapor hung around them.

To the question, "What is this interpretation, this formula which brings down upon its enunciators the formidable wrath of the critics?" we are likely to receive several answers. The first genial and rubicund gentleman of letters whom we interrogate over a bottle of Burgundy is apt to reply simply: "These fellows are arrant pessimists. They do not assure us that 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world.' They are notoriously addicted to depressing surroundings and unhappy endings. Literature should not upset one's ideas about anything, and should be either soothing, inspiring, or funny." Apparently, for all his assumed superiority the genial critic demands just about the same remoteness from the workaday world and the same comfortable ending as the tired business man, whom he professes to despise.

If we approach some gentleman who has perhaps felt a little more than our genial friend the brunt of pain and perplexity, we are likely to get a somewhat more illuminating answer. "Naturalism is Bestialism. Man is not a beast." To be sure, Zola has much to say of the *Bête Humaine*, and undoubtedly does stress in us the ape and tiger strains. But will anyone deny that the strains are there? Now and then a human being sprouts an atavistic tail or fell of hair. So, too, now and then, human beings commit atrocities at Louvain or East St. Louis. Let him that is without a streak of the beast in him cast the first stone at the *Bête Humaine*. After all, what most critics of this class object to is not the recognition of the animal, but the recognition of the animal as a serious problem. The emphasis on the beast in *L'Assomoir*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *Spoon River* shocks the conventional critic, who is accustomed to hear such things mentioned only over his after-dinner cigar: he feels it very deeply when he sees them in print where they can be read by ladies, and where apparently they are treated not as jests to roll under his tongue but as grit to break his teeth on. He is ready enough to recognize the beast, but only as a joke or a German. So long as it can be laughed away or blown to bits

with high explosive, he is quite ready to appreciate it in his Boccaccio or his Bryce reports. But when the naturalistic author shows him the beast everywhere about him, in the office, the church, and the home, and by no means to be got rid of by such simple methods as laughter or trinitrotoluol, and he realizes that only a reorganization of all his ideas in the light of what sociological, economic, and psychological experts tell him can make this abundant *élan vital* galvanize rather than blast our society, he kicks like a Missouri mule and refuses to recognize the Bête Humaine.

Perhaps, however, we have put our question to some more rational critic and he replies that he confesses the beast in man, but that he also finds a demigod: Naturalism denies the demigod. True enough, if by the demigod is meant some infusion of a supernatural or mystical element into the beast. But if by the demigod be meant simply those qualities which men have ascribed to gods as their chief and worthiest title to worship—justice and love, beauty and reason—then, of course, the Naturalist does not deny the demigod, though like the Nazarene he often discovers him in the less reputable circles of society. Furthermore, he finds embryonic even in the beast all that is popularly considered peculiar to man—art, altruism, remorse, some of the simpler forms of reasoning and foresight. In the most primitive types of humanity he finds a religion claiming as much supernatural sanction as the Roman Church or Bahaism. When confronted, then, with the fact that even animals possess the supposedly divine traits, and that as divine revelation the totem pole and the Cross claim equal authority, the Naturalist comes to the conclusion that the supernatural is only a development of the natural, and that mystical experience, however valuable as a dynamic, is worthless as a directive. Only reason acting upon the facts supplied by experience can guide us to the truth.

Accordingly the Naturalist discards as obsolete three supernaturalistic concepts—Providence, absolute moral-

ity, and freedom of the will. In his novels and plays Providence is represented as a blind bungler, conventional morality is scouted and even flouted, and man is displayed as a puppet worked by the forces of Heredity and Environment. It is about these three phases of the Naturalistic interpretation of Nature that the battle of the critics still rages. What may be said in defense of these tenets of Naturalistic doctrine—a cosmic order without justice, a morality without sanction or stability, and a will, free within limits to choose what it likes best, but determined as to what it likes best?

The idea of a Providence in the affairs of men, working out a sort of poetical justice, has, to be sure, a certain basis in fact. No one can help observing that certain acts cause pain, directly to himself or indirectly through others. The relation is far from being uniform and inevitable, but despite the exceptions certain general causal relations are recognized. It is obvious that to overindulge in Welsh rarebit or to spoil a child with petting brings its own retribution with it. But Nemesis as an instrument of God's jealous vengeance upon the mortal who dares disobey his fiat seems a superfluous explanation of these facts. For it occurs to the Naturalist that a sane ethics calls only those deeds evil which generally bring suffering in their train: and if occasionally that suffering falls upon the evil-doer there is no occasion for seeking an explanation in some mysterious Nemesis. Surely never was an absurder piece of writing than Emerson's dithyramb on *Compensation*. To him it would be a cause for wonder and awful speculation that Providence had provided a dark brown taste in the mouth to balance the exhilaration of drunkenness, and had made fire burn to punish the child for putting its finger in the flame. The fundamental idea is worthy of the good old lady who thanked the dear Lord for providing such excellent harbors where the cities of New York and San Francisco were to spring up. Nemesis is a law, just as gravitation is a law; but like gravitation it is offset a billion times a minute by other laws: and inasmuch as it is

therefore less successful than any human penal system in saddling the heaviest penalty on the worst offender, it scarcely deserves all the mystified veneration that has been lavished upon it.

Let us turn next to the Naturalist's morality. We have noted that whether an act is right or wrong depends upon whether joy or pain in the long run follows. This, in turn, depends upon the human and other sentient beings involved. These, in turn, will be affected by climate, heredity, education, and a thousand other things. Naturalistic morality differs, then, from orthodox morality in its relativity. The notion of an eternal code, confided by Infallible Wisdom to the visions of seers and the conscience of every individual, does not appeal to the Naturalistic thinker. If conscience be an infallible guide to right conduct, why did the conscience of 1700 encourage duelling, the conscience of ancient Sparta stealing, the conscience of many a zealous Jesuit lying, the conscience of the devout Mohammedan polygamy, and why was what we now regard as a loathsome sexual perversion practised unblushingly in Periclean Athens? The Naturalist has come to believe that conscience, an emotional assurance of the rightness of one's action, varies so uniformly with the social conventions about it that it can no more be relied on than a compass in the neighborhood of masses of iron. If the moral law is carved on tables of adamant for all times and all places, why is it that when the moral law interferes too severely with the right to life or happiness, we all by common consent make and approve exceptions thereto? We agree that the starving child cannot be blamed for stealing, the invalid must be kept alive by falsehoods, self-defense justifies killing, a noble purpose takes the taint from suicide. I know a clergyman, who had one of the greatest shocks of his life when I wrote him that I believed in comparative freedom of divorce, who yet not long after met with a case of domestic unhappiness, which not only led him to approve a divorce but actually to officiate at the remarriage of the divorced wife. The unpardonable sin,

to use a manner of speaking, for the Naturalist is to let a taboo stand in the way of human happiness.

Naturalistic ethics, then, are hedonistic. The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the end and criterion of action. But the Naturalistic thinker does not believe that to obey each moment's passing whim brings the maximum of happiness either for the individual or for the group. He perceives that man is a highly complex organism, whose nature includes, besides the passions, a social instinct, an artistic instinct, and a reason. In the harmonizing of all these factors lies happiness. To give controlled expression to the passions and to sublimate them, to enjoy the pleasures of social intercourse and social approval, to do all things beautifully, and viewing all these things in their relation, to harmonize them by reason,—this is the art of living. Individuals here and there may attain degrees of happiness in spite of, even by the partial denial of one or another of these four elements. One may even kill the artistic impulse and yet live in moderate pleasure. But to deny the fundamental passions or the claims of society or of reason is to court destruction. On the other hand, to follow too eagerly the seductions of any one is to distort the growth of the organism, and evil results appear either in the later development of the individual or in the society which imitates him.

What does duty mean to the Naturalistic thinker? The root of the word supplies the key. Duty is simply the debt which the individual owes to society. If society gives him much,—wealth, power, education,—society has a right to demand much. If it gives him little, it should demand little. The product of the slum, the ten hour day, and the gin palace, owes nothing to society. Society's demand that he make himself an intelligent human being and refrain from burglary, rape, and murder is an impossible impertinence on the part of society; though society will doubtless continue to enforce the payment of loans which it never made. Duty, then, is simply a claim by society upon the individual.

Since, however, the individual craves happiness and the way to complete happiness does not lie in antagonism to

society and wholesale infringement of social interests, it will always be expedient for him, no matter how little society has done for him, to work for social ends. On the whole, it pays to cash up when society sends in a bill.

What have the Naturalistic writers done for morality? We may admit at once that they have done more to throw down rotting conventions than to build up new moral and social laws. But the former service is not to be minimized. Zola built his ponderous engines of destruction up against the walls of clerical imposture and vice in many forms; Hardy battered at the undemocratic walls of Oxford colleges and laid bare the shallowness of revivalism; Wells in his Naturalistic period exploded the bladder of the patent medicine and the whole vast imposture of advertising; Galsworthy attacked a jingoistic patriotism, and enacted for us the farce-tragedy that is sometimes played under the title of "Justice"; and Masters in his *Spoon River Anthology* has pierced to the root of nearly every wrong and folly and sham that festers in the modern social body.

Greatest has been the service of the Naturalistic school to the cause of labor and the cause of women. There are Naturalists who have been indifferent or hostile to both, but they form a small minority. From Zola to Verhaeren, from Arthur Morrison to Ernest Poole, the majority of Naturalists have insistently claimed for labor that right to the pursuit of happiness which is so tantalizingly offered in our revolutionary Declaration of Independence.

For women Naturalistic literature has done the enormous service of telling the truth and the whole truth about sex. Conventional literature gave glimpses of purple mountain peaks, encircled with clouds of gold; it told besides of a vast tract hidden by sulphurous vapors, where the unwary wanderer felt the earth's crust crumble beneath him, and sank into a seething cauldron. Conventional literature charted only the most obvious parts of this region: where the concealed dangers were perhaps greatest it gave no direction. It prescribed for women one entrance only, a gate called marriage, and gave many details of the route thither. But for all the tract that lay beyond or outside

of it the details were meagre and sometimes false. Now all this region has been faithfully charted and published abroad. I venture to say the reading of half a dozen novels of the Naturalist school will exhibit more of the rationale of sex than any other body of literature ever written. Wifely subjection, the double standard of morals, prostitution, the seduction of working-girls, long sanctioned or condoned in much conventional literature, have received no quarter here. Among what school of writers are we to find one particular form of criminal folly so scarified as in *Ghosts*, *Damaged Goods*, and "Willard Fluke" of the *Spoon River Anthology*? Burke's famous generalization that no discoveries are to be made in morality breaks down before such a case. For while, doubtless, the ethical principle of which this is an application is as old as society; yet the perception of its application and the forcible presentation of the evil and its consequences, leading at last to recognition in our legislatures, is new and may be placed in large measure to the credit of the Naturalists.

Look at Tom Jones, the hero of what has been called by the conventionalists the greatest English novel. Tom is scarcely more than a slave of the moment's appetite. To be sure, he has too much sense of fair play ever to seduce women, but women have not the slightest difficulty in seducing him. The possibility that any of his adventures may have dire consequences is never faced, except when the sensational possibility of committing incest for a time horrifies him. This amiable gentleman, rather than soil his hands, resolves to sell himself to a lady in return for his keep. At last, he marries the chaste Sophia and rears a lusty brood. I should like to know what those who charge the Naturalistic novel with a predilection for feeble heroes and heroines have to say for this flabby protagonist of their greatest English novel. As a picture of random sex relations it betrays a facile optimism that no realist would be capable of.

Now by way of contrast let us look at a novel of the Naturalistic extreme,—*Sanine*, by Artzybasheff. The book is not a typical example of Naturalism, for the author derides the exercise of reason and humanitarian effort.

But even though in these respects it falls short of the saner Naturalism characteristic of Zola, Ibsen, Hardy, and Masters, even though it glorifies sexual experiences as the greatest thing in the world, yet it is so far superior to *Tom Jones* as a criticism of life that it does not flinch from the tragic possibilities in such experience, and it makes a sharp differentiation between the putrescent Koprophagy of the garrison town and the artistic expression of a healthy desire. While in my opinion the author does not sufficiently recognize that human nature has other summits than those reached in the culmination of the mightiest elemental passion, and does not realize the limitations which society has a right to place upon mating, yet in his demand that passion be beautiful as a Greek statue is beautiful, and in his recognition of the woman, not as a plaything but as a personality, he admits the place of the artistic and social impulses and justifies his classification as a Naturalist. Neither *Sanine* nor *Tom Jones* gives us anything like an exhaustive study of sex, but *Sanine* penetrates beneath the crust of convention; *Tom Jones* does not: *Sanine* has an idealism of sex; *Tom Jones* has none.

The larger Naturalism, then, founded upon the view of happiness as the goal of life, of the all round development of the individual as the way, and of the golden mean as the guiding principle, has been gradually making over our morality, ridding it of the relics of primitive taboos, and establishing it upon the demands of human nature.

But the third fundamental principle of Naturalism, determinism, is a stumbling block to many. The conventionalist is sure to object: "Granted that Naturalism has laid bare the ulcers and cancerous growths in the body of society, and has been as plain-spoken as the Old Testament or Shakespeare about things that are never mentioned in polite society, it destroys all incentive to salve those sores because it denies the freedom of the human will. It so impresses on us the thorough corruption of society that we feel that it is condemned to an eternity of disease. We see these men, as one reverend critic phrases it, 'concentrating attention on the shadiness and seaminess of life, exploiting

sewers and cesspools, dabbling in beastliness and putrefaction, dragging to light the ghastly and gruesome, poring over the scurvy and unreportable side of things, bending in lingering analysis over every phase of mania and morbidity, going down into the swamps and marshes to watch the phosphorescence of decay and the jack-o'-lanterns that dance on rottenness'; and we conclude forsooth that if this is life, there is no hope for the world."

Naturalism may at once plead guilty to the doctrine of determinism: but it does not admit that the doctrine is inconsistent with optimism of the future or that it robs man of incentive to moral action. The argument that optimism can be justified only by belief in an outside power pumping virtue into humanity by slow degrees is not convincing to anyone who realizes what is meant by potential energy. It is not necessary to believe that if a pound of radium could emit electrical energy for thousands of years it must be connected with a celestial dynamo. Neither is it necessary to believe that the human race is incapable of improving itself, however unhappy its present condition. No man can tell the potential energies latent in the human race, energies that may express themselves through reason, social feeling, and the love of beauty to make the superman. Determinism is no foe to an optimism of the future. Professor Santayana puts the theory admirably: "We are a part of the blind energy behind Nature, but by virtue of that energy we impose our purposes on that part of Nature which we constitute or control. We can turn from the stupefying contemplation of an alien universe to the building of our own house, knowing that, alien as it is, that universe has chanced to blow its energy also into our will and to allow itself to be partially dominated by our intelligence. Our mere existence and the modicum of success we have attained in society, science and art, are the living proofs of this human power. The exercise of this power is the task appointed for us by the indomitable promptings of our own spirit, a task in which we need not labor without hope."

The conventionalist pursues his point. "This all sounds mighty fine. But experience shows that a belief in the

freedom of the will and moral responsibility is all that keeps us from wallowing in a sensual sty." As the Rev. Dr. S. Law Wilson puts it, "What, we ask, would be the effect of persuading the masses of mankind to believe that all the evil of which they are guilty is necessitated, and all the blame must be laid to the door of blood, or birth, or environment, or the tyranny of impulse? Indoctrinate the masses of our population with this pestiferous teaching, and there be some of us who shall not taste of death till we see the reign of moral anarchy and disintegration set in."

Now let us see what the real effect of acting upon the doctrine of free will is as contrasted with the effect of acting upon its denial. The theory of the freedom of the will, apart from its incompatibility with the generally accepted law of causation as implying an agent that, without being itself caused, initiates or causes action, involves the doctrine of complete responsibility. For if the will could have refrained just as well as not from the immoral act, no matter how powerful the pressure of heredity and environment, the man is absolutely responsible. His guilt has no extenuation. Punishment heavy and merciless is but his due. The only thing for society to do is impress upon him the enormity of his crime and urge him to repentance.

Now the old penal methods were in entire accord with this theory. Criminals were in prison to be punished. No treatment was too bad for them. The prison chaplain dilated on their essential wickedness, and told them that they had only themselves to thank for the plight in which they found themselves. If they would freely confess their guilt and accept the inspiration of religion, though society would not forgive them, God would. Now the results of such a logical application of the doctrine of moral responsibility to the criminal class are notorious. Everyone knows that the men who went to the penitentiary did not come out penitent, far less did they come out with any propensity to good. These men had learned what the doctrine of free will was in its application to them. Somehow there seems to have been a perverse conspiracy among criminals throughout the world to discredit the doctrine of free will and its corollary, moral responsibility.

What, however, are the results of determinism as applied to these same men? Mr. Osborne, whose work at Sing Sing we all know, has without knowing it acted upon this principle. He has brought into the prison pleasure and social life and a system of stimuli in the form of rewards. He has created a society where the criminal naturally did his duty to society because society had done something for him. He has taught the men trades and made openings for them in the world, and as a result he has made citizens out of outlaws. Of his success there can be no question. What here the individual could not do for himself, environment did for him. It mattered little whether he thought his will free or not: it responded inevitably to the right stimuli. Little need have we to fear the spread of the determinist theory among the masses, if only we have intelligence enough to practice as well as to preach it.

The conventionalist once more objects. "But turn away from life to your own Naturalistic novels. Are they not shrieking in our ears that man is feeble and doomed to failure? Are not their heroes and heroines weaklings who fall unresisting under the bludgeonings of Fate?"

Now it may well be admitted that the Naturalists, in order to show where the rocks lie, have usually represented their human barks as breaking upon the reefs rather than gliding smoothly into harbor. But in doing so the Naturalists have done only what every tragic writer has done. If the Mayor of Casterbridge or Madame Bovary fell through a combination of defects of character with adverse circumstances, what else may we say of Hamlet and Lear? Are we to despise Tess of the D'Urbervilles because though she often showed great strength of character, at certain crises of her fate timidity prevailed over purpose? When the conventionalists begin to call the great tragedies decadent on the same grounds that they condemn the Naturalistic novels; when they scorn Desdemona because when her husband suspected her she did not call up the Pinkerton's detective agency of Cyprus and probe the matter to the bottom, and because on her deathbed she did not wrestle courageously, but murmured merely, "A guiltless death I

die," then we may listen patiently when they apply these standards to works not in the classic tradition. Until then some of us are inclined to believe that these critics unconsciously act upon the principle that any stick is good enough to beat a dog with.

Dr. Johnson once said that if he had no duties and no reference to futurity he should spend his life in driving briskly in a post-chaise with a pretty woman. To such a declaration the appropriate Johnsonian reply is, "You lie, sir." If the Doctor would permit of any further explanation, we might go on to say: "In the first place, Fate might refuse. Fate, in the form of the pretty woman, might politely decline the invitation. She might prefer other company to that of the hectoring oracle of the Mitre, the polysyllabic proser of the *Rambler* papers: she might object to being referred to as an unidea-ed girl. In the second place, if the woman found it agreeable, the Doctor himself would soon have found it disagreeable. It may be an impertinence to presume that we know the Doctor better than he knew himself, but Boswell has made the claim possible. Now the Doctor had certain hereditary traits that would never have been satisfied for long with sitting in a post-chaise beside a pretty woman. He had too active a brain, he was too much of a clubman, and, as a matter of fact, despite all his complaints of indolence, he had an instinct for work. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine that Samuel Johnson would have let the American Revolution go by without leaping from the post-chaise and scratching off *Taxation No Tyranny*. At the very least, he would have had to stop for a moment, stretch his limbs, and perhaps roll down a hill for the fun of it. Without disparaging the worthy Doctor's sincerity, one may say that, granted his pecuniary and other restrictions, he would have lived much the same life if he had had no theories of duty beyond what every social being holds, and no more reference to futurity than the desire that the rest of life contain as much happiness as he could put into it.

Moreover, one cannot help thinking that if Doctor John-

son had exerted his great influence, not as a conventionalist and Tory, but as a Naturalist and democrat, the whole course of events in Europe might have been changed. His posthumous power might have offset the Bourbonism of Burke; England might not have thrown her strength on the side of that Holy Alliance of Prussian, Austrian, and Russian despotisms; the contagion of a liberal England and France might have liberalized Europe; and the world might have been made safe for democracy a hundred years ago. But it was not to be.

There are people who see in Naturalism the origin of this war and in the triumph of the Allies the vindication of Providence. Such a view is only possible through a misconception of the facts. The insane policies of German imperialism found ready support throughout the ranks of the German supernaturalists, and palliation in that inviolate citadel of supernaturalism, the Vatican. On the other hand, the bitterest and most courageous of the foes of German imperialism were a small group of atheistic socialists in Germany, whose creed was the creed of Naturalism. As for the victory of the Allies I can see nothing but a confirmation of Napoleon's blunt statement that God is always on the side of the heaviest battalions. The feeble succor afforded by St. Michael at Mons hardly leads one to rely much upon the heavenly powers for aid. The despairing prayers of millions went unheeded until material force came to the aid of spiritual yearnings. One who can believe in supernaturalism after this war possesses, indeed, a faith which indeed serves as an evidence of things not seen. Let him have his angels of Mons and be happy. But the rest of us, in this time momentous and critical as scarcely any other time in the world's history, can hardly afford to base our hopes for the future on any efforts but our own, or afford to direct those efforts by any but Naturalistic principles: for these must bring happiness in their wake, or *ipso facto* cease to be the principles of Naturalism.